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ABSTRACT

These two teaching guides, one for the novel "Summer Song," (appropriate for grades 5 through 8) and one for the novel "Libby Bloom" (appropriate for grades 3 through 6) are designed to help teachers use these children's books in interdisciplinary classroom settings. The "Summer Song" guide offers thematic links on the topics of "friendship," "family," "compromise," and "separation and loss," and interdisciplinary links for language arts, math, social science, music, and art. The guide provides thematic links on the topics of "friendship," "family," and "self confidence," and interdisciplinary links for math, social studies, language arts, music, art, computers, and science. (NKA)

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TEACHING GUIDES

SUMMER SONG and LIBBY BLOOM

By

Susan Rowan Masters

July 1999

SUMMER SONG

Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8

"Etta May, a self-proclaimed magnet for disaster, carries more than her share of burdens. Soon after the death of her beloved grandmother, her grandfather Gent grows too weak from emphysema to tend his cherished roses or take care of the rundown trailer where he and Etta May live. When Etta May realizes that Gent's disease is terminal, she resolves to carry out his last wish: to die in his own bed. She wages a lonely battle against doctors and, even more painfully, the absentee mother she has hitherto seen 'all of nine times.' In the tradition of *Where the Lilies Bloom* and *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, this story about love and compromise traces the struggles of a determined child taking on adult responsibilities. Scenes depicting the clash of wills among three generations are balanced with portrayals of familial tenderness and compassion. Masters' quick dialogue adds color, while poignant narrative evokes the frustration, fear and final acceptance experienced in the face of a deep loss." -- *Publishers Weekly*

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Teaching Ideas

Summer Song appeals to a wide audience of young readers, many whom may be facing difficult issues themselves. Because the plot deals realistically about a fractured family and a teen's struggle for control, students can better grasp what Etta May herself finally comes to understand: **while we cannot control life, we can affect parts of it**. Bits of humor help lighten what could be a heavy tone as it asks readers to think about **family**, **separation**, and **loss**.

Thematic Links

Topic	Description
Friendship	-- Ask students to describe Etta May and Quentin's friendship. Etta May calls him her best friend. What are the qualities in Quentin that she says, "made me forget the rough edges?" Both of their mothers have left for different reasons. How might this strengthen their friendship? At first Etta May doesn't trust her neighbor Mrs. Moreles who she thinks is a snoop. How and when does her attitude change?
Family	-- Ask students to describe the relationship between Etta May and Gent, and Etta May and her mother Claire. Ask how Etta May deals with the feelings she has for Claire, bringing in during the discussion the word "ambivalence." At what point in the story does Etta May finally gain a sense that the three of them are truly a family? How does this affect what she does next?
Compromise	-- Etta May is caught between her promise to Gent who wants to die at home in his "own bed" and her mother who wants to move them to Pittsburgh to live with her. Could Etta May have resolved her dilemma differently? Would it have been better than the path she chose and why?
Separation and Loss	-- Etta May and Quentin both experience separation from their mothers. Ask students to compare and contrast the way each one deals with their feelings. Later, Etta May and her mother face the loss of Gent. How do you think they might help support each other after his death? While readers know that Gent will eventually die, still they are left with a sense of hope. Have students explain.

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Interdisciplinary Links

Topic	Description
Language Arts	-- If Etta May were to keep a journal, what might she write after she and Claire return home from the hospital (pages 38-39) and they are starting to get along? What might Etta May write the next day when she finds out about Eddie and the fact that her mother is going back to Pittsburgh for what she calls "an emergency?" Does it remind you of a similar experience you might have had or read about?
Math	-- Quentin has his heart set on an electric guitar that he has seen at the mall in Liberty. Have students look up the price of a new instrument verses the cost of renting a similar one. Make a chart showing all the charges and insurance fees. Over a year's time, which would be more economical? What are the advantages/disadvantages of renting verses purchasing an instrument?
Social Science	-- Invite a Hospice volunteer to the classroom to share his/her own experiences with the students as well as the philosophy of the program.
Music	-- Quentin makes up his own country western songs. Bring in to class a variety of music (country western, jazz, rap, rock/roll, classical, etc.) Ask the students to describe how they are similar and how they are different. Discuss the fact that the various styles do not remain static; they evolve over time (i.e., the number and type of electrical instruments used today verses years ago.)
Art	-- Etta May first hears about the "WHUG Jumpin' Jamboree Talent Show" on the radio. Ask each student to design a poster advertising the event.

Closure

Etta May finally came to understand that while we cannot control life, we can affect parts of it. How did this help Etta May resolve what seemed an insurmountable problem? Ask students how it might help with their own lives.

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LIBBY BLOOM

Grades 3, 4, 5, and 6

"With a mixture of farce and affection, Masters tells the story of fourth-grader Libby Bloom, who embarrasses herself and fails and still carries on. Libby gets thrown out of chorus, not only for singing off-key, but also for burping during the star's solo. But when Libby is forced to play in the school band, she gets help from a sympathetic teacher, who encourages her to play the tuba and to make a difference in the school community. Libby practices hard, and, of course, the school concert is the climax of the story, but it's no formula success: even there, Libby fails and plays sour notes -- and then goes on to play the last song perfectly. Beata Szpura's exuberant cartoon illustrations express the comedy without condescension" -- *Booklist*

Teaching Ideas

Libby Bloom is a humorous beginning chapter book that keeps the reader smiling, even through the serious parts. Among the thought provoking themes students will explore are **family**, **friendship**, **activism**, and **self-confidence**. This guide offers a variety of interdisciplinary tie-ins.

Thematic Links

Topic	Description
Friendship	-- Ask students to name the qualities they look for in a friend (i.e., similar interests, willingness to share, loyalty, a good listener, etc.) Afterward, have the students find examples of where Libby and Ralph's friendship have the same qualities they have listed. Discuss this statement: **In order to have a friend, you must first be a friend.**
Family	-- Ask students to describe Libby's relationship with her parents and sister. In what ways is Libby's family similar to yours? Different? How do her parents support Libby when she gets "cold feet" after Mrs. Whippo invites her to the school board meeting?
Self Confidence	-- Have students discuss Libby's feelings as she compares herself with her talented sister, Noel. Talk about their age difference and ask how that might affect Libby's feelings. Bring into the discussion the meaning of **envy** and **lack of self-confidence**. How does Libby eventually become more self-confident? Ask students what it says about a person who other people call, "having a big head." Help them to recognize that true self-confidence can only be gained though effort -- when you are willing to work hard toward a goal.

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Interdisciplinary Links

Topic	Description
Math	-- The book begins with Libby singing off-key in the school chorus. Ask students what range of singing voices are in their chorus (i.e., soprano, alto). What does Libby sing? Lead them to conclude that since Libby struggles to sing the high part she is probably an alto. Ask students to count the number of high range voices and low range voices for both boys and girls in the school chorus. Have them graph the results. Younger students can construct a bar graph, while older students can construct a pie graph using percentages. Prediction. Have students predict how voice range changes as they mature and find out what other singing voices -- besides soprano and alto -- are in their local high school chorus (tenor, bass). Make a graph, then compare the two graphs.
Social Studies	-- Mr. Cheney, the band teacher, shares this advice: "The things in life that come hard, that really challenge us, we end up valuing the most. Like learning to play the tuba or working to make right what we believe is wrong." When he writes an editorial on budget cuts for the local paper, Libby is inspired to do something herself. She turns her interest in cartoon drawing into her own political activism. Ask students what famous and not so famous people they can name who have tried to "make right what they believe is wrong," bringing into the discussion the term "political activism" (i.e., Martin Luther King, Jr.; Susan B. Anthony.) Can they name someone in their own community?
Language Arts	-- Ask students to bring in the editorial pages of their local newspaper. Have them choose an article that they strongly agree/disagree with. Ask them to write their own editorial response. Or, if they prefer, have them write on another issue that they feel strongly about (i.e., protecting the environment, use of animal fur, school dress code.) On page 4 after Libby burps, the boys were "rolling in their chairs, guffawing." Explain that this is called figurative speech. Have students make up their own sentences describing a visual picture of an action that is not literal.

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Music*	Libby takes music lessons from Mr. Cheney, the band instructor. Does their school offer individual lessons as well? To introduce the various instruments (brass, percussion, woodwinds, etc.) invite the band instructor and/or band members to your classroom. Or make arrangements to take students on a field trip to a local high school during their band practice session. Only after Libby learns to blow though the mouthpiece properly (purse her lips and buzz) can she begin to play the tuba. By having students try various instruments they can discover for themselves how difficult and perhaps rewarding playing an instrument can be.
Art	-- Libby draws a political cartoon which she sends to the local newspaper. Have students draw their own political cartoons illustrating what they have said or say on a new issue. Ask how a political cartoon might be more powerful than an article on a similar subject (i.e., a drawing is visual with an immediate impact on the onlooker, whereas an article must be read to the end.) What might be a drawback (i.e., information is limited.) Libby creates a cartoon character she calls Stretch McKinsy. Have students create their own character and produce a short comic strip (option: use computer software utilizing clip art.)
Computer	-- Have students research their social studies/language arts projects at home/school through the Internet.
Science*	-- On page 17 "a deep rumble echoed off the pocked walls. It faded away leaving only the sound of knocking and rattling from the boiler room across the hall." Have students make a sound (a handclap, hitting a drum, etc.) in different environments around the school (i.e., cafeteria, gym, outdoors, classroom, closet.) Talk about how sound waves travel. Develop a musical scale: use bottles of the same size, fill each with various amounts of water to construct the scale.

Closure

Tell students that, like Libby, big things get done by people making a difference in a variety of small ways. Leave students with this thoughtful question. Where can they make a difference?

*Suggestions submitted by Joan Masters, certified teacher in N-6 Elementary and Special Education.

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